

Christmas 2013
What's Your Story
December 24, 2013

PRELUDE – “Christmas Cookies”

Worship Songs – “Angels from the Realms of Glory” / “What Child is This?”
Feature – “Light of the Stable” (Selah)

Video – “Retooning the Nativity”

“Even when all of the manmade traditions are stripped away, the eternal truths still remain.”

And that’s a really good thing because, as the video illustrated, not all of our traditional understandings of what happened on that first Christmas are completely accurate ... including (as the video pointed out) the time of year that Jesus was born. As lovely as the song makes it sound, Jesus was probably not born on a cold winter’s night like tonight. More likely, it happened in summer or early fall because that’s typically when shepherds were in the fields at night with their sheep.

Sorry if I just ruined Christmas for you!

Even worse, the fact we don’t celebrate Jesus’ birth on the actual date plus some of the inaccuracies that we heard about in the video has led some to suspect that Jesus *never really existed in the first place*; that the whole story of his birth, life, death and resurrection was a myth created many years later by those who founded the Christian church. “After all,” the theory goes, “since they invented the date of his birth – literally stealing it from the pagan winter festival celebrating the return of the sun from the southern hemisphere – since they invented the date of his birth, why wouldn’t they invent everything else?”

I’m sure you’ve heard that idea at least once in your life because it’s been around for at least a few centuries.

And there are many reasons why it doesn’t hold water not the least of which is that, if you were going to “invent” a Jewish Messiah, he would not be anything like the person of Jesus of Nazareth. He wouldn’t hang out with the riff-raff. He wouldn’t argue with the religious leaders. He certainly wouldn’t get himself crucified by the Romans. And the first person to see him alive after his resurrection most certainly would not be a woman. Yet, those are key elements of the story of Jesus of Nazareth.

But in the few minutes I have this evening, that’s really not what I want to talk to you about – reasons why you can trust that the story of Jesus is true. We’ll do that next spring before Easter.

And I also don’t want to delve into all the inaccuracies of some of the traditions that have developed from a misreading and misunderstanding of what the Bible actually says about the first Christmas. I think anyone with an open mind can see that it really doesn’t matter (for instance) whether Jesus was born in a stable or a cave or even, as many biblical historians suggest, in a home belonging to one of Joseph’s relatives.ⁱ

Instead, what I want to talk to you about is something that really *does* matter; something that really *is* a big deal –

the inaccuracy of several *other* traditional understandings of Christianity; things that most people assume that Christianity teaches about God and human beings that not only are incorrect but also serve to fundamentally change the core meaning of what Jesus was all about, what he came to accomplish and what he stood for.

And the reason why I want to do this ... and I'll just lay my cards on the table right now ... is that some of you here tonight are living under these misconceptions. You've gotten it in your head that Christianity teaches "this" or "that" when in fact it does not. The storyline that you have running in your head concerning what Jesus and the Bible and the church are all about is based on traditions of men that are simply not accurate.

And because of those misconceptions, you don't want to have anything to do with Christ and the church. That's why you only come to church on Christmas and Easter. That's why, really, you're only here tonight ...

- Because it's tradition that you go to church on Christmas Eve
- Or because you were invited by a Christian family member or friend and you wanted to be nice
- Or because you knew there would be a battle if you didn't show up and you just wanted to keep the piece.

And, honestly, I'm not being critical of you in the least when I say that because, if I believed what you believed – if I had in my head what you have in your head about Christianity – I'd be here just once or twice a year, too. And, then, only because I had to!

Common Misconceptions

And I know right now some of you are thinking "so what kinds of things are you talking about Rick? What beliefs or ideas about Christianity do you think I have that are incorrect? What misconceptions do you think are in my head?"

Well, obviously, I don't know for sure what's in your head. But if you're like most people in this culture who have a somewhat vague understanding of the Christian faith, you probably believe at least a few of the following statements.

1. You have to have "blind faith" to be a Christian.

Christianity requires its adherents to force themselves to believe something with their heart even though their head knows it really isn't true. You have to close your eyes and deny the evidence that's out there and just believe. Have blind faith. That's what true faith really is.

If you're like most people you probably believe that ...

2. Jesus (and church) is for women and children.

After all, Jesus was such a nice man. He was just *so* sweet and kind. He loved everybody. He just wanted everybody to get along. No bumps and bruises. No conflict. And that must be what he intended his church to be like. That's what a lot of people think.

If you're like most people in this culture with a vague understanding of Christianity, you probably believe that ...

3. All Christians believe God has a special hatred for homosexuals.

That's what a lot of people think and not without some justification because, a few wacko Christians in recent years (like the group in Topeka that shall not be named) have gotten a lot of attention in the news media.

Here's another thing a lot of people believe:

4. Church is *meant* to be dull and boring.

That's the way God wants it and it doesn't really count unless it is. You have to get dressed up, sing lots and lots of songs written in the King's English and then listen to a preacher drone on and on about Greek verbs that don't have any connection to real life. That's church for a lot of people.

Even worse than that (a lot of people think), the Bible teaches that ...

5. Heaven *will* be dull and boring.

What God has planned for those He loves is an eternity of useless floating around on a cloud, strumming a harp and getting to attend dull and boring church services ... forever and ever and ever and ever. Oh, boy, sign me up!

A lot of people believe that ...

6. You have to be a Republican to be a true Christian.

And if you're really serious about following Jesus, you'll be a card-carrying tea-partier. Democrats – and, even worse, Libertarians and Independents – need not apply.

And a lot of people think ...

7. The whole Bible is meant to be taken literally.

For example, “if you're going to be a Christian, you have to believe that the world was created in six 24-hour days and that the human race is less than 10,000 years old.”

I mean, that *is* the story in Genesis, right? God said it, so I have to believe it, and that settles it. Right?

And I could add another dozen or so statements to this list but I think you get the point.

So, let me ask: do any of those statements resonate with you? As in, that's what you think Christianity teaches or is supposed to be about? Do you know people who think that's what Christianity teaches or is supposed to be about?

Now, because I put these statements in the list of common misconceptions, obviously, I am saying *that these are*

incorrect. In the same way that we get it wrong about certain aspects of the Christmas story, a lot of us get it wrong when it comes to Christianity as a whole. Unfortunately, I don't have time this evening to go through all of them and explain *why* they are misconceptions, so you'll just have to trust me on it ...

... or, if you're not currently part of a church, you're welcome to come hang out with us because these are the kinds of things we talk about all the time, in addition to things like:

- How to deal with the junk in your past
- How to get along with people around you, people who rub you the wrong way
- How to experience God's presence more and more in your life
- How to make sense of this world and all the garbage that goes on in it
- How to make a positive difference in your own world

See, our goal here is and always has been to help people discover more and more of the grace and truth of Jesus and how that applies to real life. We want people to understand it and apply it so that they can become more of who God wants them to be.

As the Apostle Paul once put it:

Don't copy the behavior and customs of this world, but let God transform you into a new person by changing the way you think. Then you will learn to know God's will for you, which is good and pleasing and perfect. *Romans 12:2 (NLT)*

The Greatest Misconception

And because of that, in the time that remains, I want to look at what is probably the single greatest misconception that people have about Christianity and what it teaches. If you get this right, it will make all the difference. If you get this wrong, it will make all the difference. And what's really unsettling about this particular issue is that not only do most non-Christians believe it, a lot of Christians – dedicated followers of Jesus – believe it as well.

Let me explain.

A lot of people – believers and non-believers – think that Christianity is just one of many “spiritual pathways” that lead to salvation. It's just one of many ways that people can attempt to reconcile themselves to God.

You see, all major religions say the same basic thing about how people ought to live. C.S. Lewis, a famous philosopher, semi-theologian and writer, once observed that all major religions have eight basic rules in common. But all major religions also say that *we don't live the way we should*. Every major world religion acknowledges the gap between *what we are* and *what we ought to be*.

And because there is a gap – because we don't live up to the standard – every religion says that we humans are at odds with God (or the Universe or whatever Transcendent Being or Force that particular religion believes in). And every major religion prescribes a similar way to deal with that gap and to make peace with divine justice ... every religion except for one: Christianity.

And to illustrate how Christianity is unique, I want to show you a short video parable. If you're a regular attender here, you'll probably remember this from earlier this fall.

Let's watch.

<end slide set 1>

Video – “A Man Fell in a Hole” (3 mins)

<begin slide set 2>

In every religion except for Christianity, salvation is something that's attained by human effort. You have to do something to prove you are worthy or that you deserve it. In Christianity, salvation comes by *grace* – by God doing for us what we do not deserve and cannot do for ourselves, with *no strings attached*.

However ... many people are confused about that or believe it's too good to be true. In fact, as a pastor, I have known many Christians who will sing about grace and claim to believe in it but, in reality, they live according to a “grace plus” plan.

A lot of people see this parable of the man in the hole and observe that the guy *could have just climbed up the rope*. Yes, *someone did need to drop the rope* down to him and it might not have been easy and he might have needed to heal up a bit first BUT he could have done the rest himself.

That's how a lot of us look at ourselves. Yes, we do fall short of God's perfection but we're not *that* far short. All we really need is just a little bit of help; just a little boost so we can get up that rope by ourselves.

In the days of the medieval church (before Martin Luther and the Protestant Reformation) that's exactly how people believed grace worked. God offered grace, but people also needed to do “their part” as well in order to receive salvation. The popular phrase in that day and time was “God will not deny his grace to those who do what they can.”ⁱⁱ In other words, God will drop the rope (that rope is Jesus) to you if you will make the effort to climb up (you'll be good, you'll behave).

But that, friends, is most definitely NOT what the Bible teaches. It's one of those traditions that people fall into believing because the truth is too radical and maybe even nonsensical to our human way of thinking.

So, just to be clear, since you made the effort to come tonight, here's what the Bible teaches. This is what Christianity is all about. Get this right and everything else will make sense.

God saved you by his grace when you believed. And you can't take credit for this; it is a gift from God. Salvation is not a reward for the good things we have done, so none of us can boast about it. For we are God's masterpiece. Ephesians 2:8-10 (NLT)

In Christianity, God does it all for us. There is only one condition and Paul tells us right there in that first line what it is. He says:

“God saved you by his grace *when you believed*.”

- Not “God saved you when you finally decided to clean up your act and live right.”
- Not “when you started going to church and praying.”
- Not “when you felt really bad about how much you let God and everyone else down.”

No, “God saved you by his grace when you believed” ... which raises the obvious question: what exactly did they believe?

Well, Paul plainly tells us what the first Christians believed that led to salvation in one of the letters he wrote to the Corinthians. In Chapter 15 of first Corinthians, he says ...

I passed on to you what was most important and what had also been passed on to me.

Are you ready? Here it is:

Christ died for our sins, just as the Scriptures said. He was buried, and he was raised from the dead on the third day, just as the Scriptures said. 1 Corinthians 15:3-4 (NLT)

That’s what people believed that saved them. Or as Paul put it in his letter to the Romans ...

If you confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. Romans 10:8-9 (NLT)

Or as we read again and again in the book of Acts – the story of how Christianity began to spread throughout the Roman Empire – and this is just one example from when Paul and his companions were thrown into prison and God miraculously intervened to set them free ...

He [the jailer] then brought them out and asked, “Sirs, what must I do to be saved?”

They replied, “Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved—you and your household.” Acts 16:30-31 (NLT)

If we had time, I could go on and on with examples of this but I think you get the point. Salvation does not come from anything other than believing that Jesus died for our sins and was raised to life again on the third day. That’s what it takes for God’s saving grace to be activated in our life. That’s what makes Christianity unique.

And that’s what so few people understand.

Communion

Which is why Christians often celebrate communion. And that’s what we’re going to do tonight in the next part of this service. This is a reminder, when we do communion, that it’s not about us – it’s not about our worthiness or anything we need to do. It’s about what Jesus has done for us already.

The bible tells us that when Christians used to get together to do this, they would take the bread, and Jesus said, “when you take this bread, it’s a reminder to you that my body was broken for you on the cross in payment for your sins.” The juice reminds us that his blood was shed for our sins on the cross.

So, just to be clear, when we do this, it's a reminder of something that has happened. It's not something we do in order to be forgiven because, again, that's one of those things where we're trying to pull ourselves up by a rope. But this has already been done. We're just remembering what the baby boy born to Mary and Joseph grew up to do and to be. He gave his life on the cross to atone for our sin. That's what Jesus told his followers to do. "Do this in remembrance of me."

So, tonight, that's what we're going to do ...

- Come to the table near you.
- Take a piece of bread and dip it in the juice and take it whenever you're ready.
- Pick up a candle which you will need for the closing of the service.

Here's what I think is going to happen. Some of you tonight will come to this table and take this bread and juice and you've already understood this truth about grace and what Jesus has done for you. And this is going to be a moment of thanksgiving for you, and you're going to say, "God, thank you so much for that night all those years ago when Jesus came into this world and grew up to be our savior."

Some of you tonight are going to come to this table and say, "I never understood that this is about what Jesus has done, not about what God expects me to do. For the first time I get it, Jesus. I thank you so much for being my savior. I believe that you died on the cross for my sins and you rose on the third day. Thank you for saving me." That's what's going to happen for some of you tonight.

Some of you tonight, you're listening to this and you're going, "Okay, this is really different. This is kind of a weird church service. I've never been in anything like this. I'm really not sure about this." Here's what I want to tell you - you're invited to come as well.

You know, one of the things that got Jesus into so much trouble was that he continually invited people who were not believers, people who were not religious people, and people who did not have their act together to come and hang out with him. I think tonight he is inviting some of you for the first time to just come and receive and just see what happens, see what God does in your life.

I want to offer that invitation to all of us tonight. Let me say a quick prayer, and as you feel led, move to a table near you, pick up a candle and then have a seat and we'll close after that.

Communion / "O Holy Night"

Prayer

God, thank you so much for what Jesus has done. Thank you for the way you have reached into this world and that on the night Jesus was born it was an invasion of love and salvation into our world. God, I pray that wherever we are tonight, whether we're long-time believers or we're just now getting the truth in our head, you would speak to us and meet us in this moment.

We give this to you in Jesus' name, Amen.

Let's sing together.

Worship – “Silent Night” / Candle Lighting

Prayer / Closing

As you leave ...

- Put candle in empty baskets in the commons
- If this is your church and you wish to make an offering put that in the basket the ushers have at the door.

I'm glad you were with us tonight. Have a Merry Christmas!

Endnotes

ⁱ <http://christiananswers.net/q-abr/abr-a012.html>

ⁱⁱ <http://www.monergism.com/thethreshold/articles/onsite/essentials.html>